Expressive Nature of Children: Life in the 1930s and 1940s

Helen Levitt was a photographer of the New York Streets in the 1930s and 1940s. She was an incredibly private person who was able to capture life through series of street scenes. “It was a time when indoor temptations didn't yet lure people off the street. Levitt would walk all over the city, shooting, for the most part, in the streets of Spanish Harlem. ‘It was a good neighborhood for taking pictures in those days, because that was before television. There was a lot happening… In the late '30s, those neighborhoods were very active’" (“NPR's All Things Considered”). Since there were so many different people out and around the streets, it was easy for her to capture many different aspects of life. From all of her photographs, I have chosen to focus on her works that include children. I first saw these images in a collection of Helen Levitt’s work presented by Newsweek. They can be found at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/galleries/2009/03/31/photos-helen-levitt-1913-2009.html>. These images convey a meaning that is so much more than just playtime in city streets. They demonstrate life of the 1930s and 1940s through the expressive nature of children. Together these photographs show the simplicity of life before an era of television and computers. The focus is on the play of children, but through their expressions and gestures, we begin to see what life was really about. Using the Rhetorical ideas of John D. Ramage and Roland Barthes, this essay will define these images and how they show, through the expression of child’s play, the simplicity that life can hold.

In an article by Roland Barthes, *Rhetoric of the Image*, we learn of three messages that are seen in each image. These include the linguistic message, the coded (symbolic) iconic message, and the non-coded (literal) iconic message. The two iconic messages come from the image itself, while the linguistic message comes from any of the text associated with the image. The two iconic messages are intertwined and somewhat hard to distinguish, “the literal message appears as the support of the ‘symbolic’ message” (Barthes). It can be hard to understand this coded message because it is symbolic and connotated. However, as Barthes goes on to explain, “there is no particular language corresponding to the particularity of its signifieds” (Barthes). That is to say that while the symbols and the understand may be coded, it is not defined by any specific code that needs to understood before studying the image. The other two messages lend a hand in defining the coded message. The non-coded message was already said to support the coded (symbolic) message; “When it comes to the ‘symbolic message,’ the linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation” (Bathes).

 The first image that appealed to me from the collection, was this one pictured below. The photograph at first look is simple; it includes a young girl and young boy in the street playing. But when you start to look at the image and analyze what is actually going on, you begin to see the deeper meaning. Let’s first look at the image in context of the colors and shadows. While, the image is itself in black and white, we can see the tones of the grays as light and dark. This is further developed through the symbolic messages within the image. These two children, coming from different backgrounds themselves, are dancing around in the street. The little girl, of Caucasian descent, is seen in the strip of sunlight that is between the shadows. While the young boy, of African American descent is shown in the shadows. This can symbolize the unfair advantage, and added privileges, that she is given just by being of a certain race. Even knowing this and seeing the proof in the image, we still see that these children are playing together. They are not separated and they are not angry or hateful towards one another. Their simple movements and calm faces show that even when the world is at war, children can display compassion. Looking further into the meaning behind this image, we see that life can be simple; simple enough to evoke thought and change, just through the “play” of children.

 Moving on with the idea that children’s expressions can define a way of life, we can now look at the second image I have chosen. This image, as seen to the left, displays young boys play fighting on a rooftop. To these children the city is a large playground, full of places to explore. And while this image is also in black and white, the concept of shadows does not play as large a role. The focus of this image is more on the large doorway, over which the boys are playing. Lets begin by looking at the lower right side of the image; on the brick wall there is some writing that states post no bills. This writing is something simple, which was posted on many different buildings at the time. It simply meant that people were to no put up banners, posters, advertisements, etc. on these buildings. However, Helen Levitt chose to keep this in the shot, when she could have simply put the focus up more onto the boys on the rooftop. This writing adds to the photograph in the sense that these children can play around the city how they please, but others had to follow rules and regulations such as not posting advertisements. Bringing the focus back to the boys, the photograph can be viewed in another sense. These children are pushing one another while they are about eight to ten feet in the air; children don’t always see the dangers that adults see. While some may say that this is a negative thing, lets take a minute to view it as a positive. Children are not aware of the dangers in the world and are therefore not afraid to explore and discover; if all children were to lets say, hide from all the bad things, nothing new would get discovered. So while yes, we need to be aware of the dangers, we also need to be willing to face them and move forward despite them. In looking at the children, we see in their faces that they are just playing around, fighting for fun and in good nature. However, these acts are probably being repeated from example. Children learn through models and repeat what they see; the boys in this image are no different. These acts that they are playing out come from something else that we do not get to see by simply looking at the photograph. Now it is important to also remember that the 21st century was not the first, immediate audience of this image. The original audience viewing the image was from the 1940s; this was just another photograph of the daily life that they were living. Life in the city was not all glamour and it was in fact the exact opposite. The hard economy had hit and the people in the city felt its repercussions as much as anyone else. If you look at the center of the image, the main focus is on the door. It is boarded up, the rundown side of the city becoming apparent. But again that draws us back to the children, while the rest of the world is facing hard times economically, children are able to move on and continue being themselves.

 While times had certainly changed since the 1930s and 1940s, when we first saw Helen Levitt’s photographs, the city backdrop that fills this image from the 1970s, still shows a rundown town. Out of three images, this is the only one in color. However, I have chosen not to focus on the colors as much as the other aspects of the image. The most eye-catching part of the image is city scene behind the children. The walls and boarded windows show that during the 30 or 40 years between this image and the others, the city has stayed rundown in not becoming more so. The graffiti on the walls is a symbol of the poor lifestyle that these people live. However, being the focus to the children shows that life can’t be that bad. Looking at their faces, we can see that they are smiling; looking at their body language and easy curves of their figures, we can see that they are happy. While this photograph does not focus on play, as the other two images do, it still shows the expressions of children and they can represent the opposite of what the world around them is going through. These children, living in the poverty of a rundown city, are still happy.

The children in these images are sort of a metaphor for life. Think about it, John D. Ramage explains in his book, Rhetoric: A User’s Guide, defines metaphors as “the only language—other than nonsense—that ignores the Law of Contradiction’s insistence that ‘A cannot both exit and not exist.’ The language of metaphor is the playful language of ‘both – and’” (Ramage, 37). In these images, metaphors play into the idea that children’s expressive nature defines how simple life can be. Starting with the first image of the two children dancing, we can see that they dance about without a care in the world even though nothing in the world was right at the time. The second image of the young boys fighting it’s a little harder to see this metaphor. But it is still apparent, the boys are play fighting and climbing buildings; the world around them is falling apart. SO while the play of these children represents the destruction, the fact that they are still running about the streets playing shows that this has not affected them the same as people who understand the destruction of the world as it occurs. The third image, makes it more apparent again. These children are pulling a laundry cart down the street, a street that is covered with evidence of destruction. And with everything that has been going on in the world and with all the unfair circumstance that these children have been put in, the still find a reason to smile. Children are simple; so while turmoil exists all around them, these children live in peace.

Together these images tell a story. They tell a story that goes deeper than children in a poor city. They tell a story that means more than playtime and smiles. They tell a story of hard times and that life goes on. Referring back to the first image, taken around 1940, the world had just declared war. And while the United States had not yet joined, it was still an extremely rough time and people were struggling. And yet those children are dancing in the streets, without a care. They are an example that we need to keep moving forward and just “dance” through the rough times waiting for it to get better. The second image, taken around the same time as the first, is more an example of what children take from adults. The world was at war with itself and these children reenacted fighting amongst themselves. But when we look at it in the whole sense, taking in the scene, we see that these children aren’t afraid of the dangers around them. While the world is at war and people are scared, these children are playing in the streets, on a rooftop. They play through the fears and dangers that other people can see; children keep moving even when the rest of the world stops to fear. The third image, taken in the 1970s, shows the devastation and destruction that can be long lasting after war. These children are living through this time and while it may be tough, they are still happy. Children can see the positive in a situation even when adults may not be able to.

Works Cited

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